

# Conference on poverty spotlights food insecurity

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New Hanover County Commissioner Jonathan Barfield said Wednesday he wished he could say poverty in Southeastern North Carolina had “flatlined” – that it had died.

That's not the case, though, and Taking the the Pulse on Poverty, the third annual conference at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, showed that even though the economy made improvements since the Great Recession, poverty has not declined.

“Food insecurity” and “food deserts” were the buzzwords at the conference where Barfield spoke. Food insecurity is the new way of defining hunger, and North Carolina ranks fifth-highest in the nation in that category. Food deserts are areas where residents have limited accessibility to healthy food options, primarily grocery stores. The presentations detailed how the food deserts existed in both rural and urban communities.

Speakers Jill Waity and Tazra Mitchell said government programs such as food stamps and WIC don't necessarily fulfill the needs of everyone struggling with food insecurity. That's where community food banks and soup kitchens help those people get the nutrition they need.

Mitchell also said that in places without supermarkets, residents rely on corner grocers and convenience stores for their food purchases. She mentioned a state initiative that is working with corner food store owners on providing healthier options for consumers.

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A panel of workers for the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina and Feast Down East discussed the ways they provide food to those who need it. The methods are progressive and varied – the organizations glean crops from farmers' fields, use outdated supermarket excess, run produce stands and even send weekend meals home with schoolchildren.

Waity, a professor of sociology at [UNCW](#), showed that rural areas experienced the highest levels of poverty in Southeastern North Carolina. Mitchell, a policy analyst at the N.C. Budget and Tax Center, said tax changes that penalize poor North Carolinians and cuts to financial assistance programs have increased the need for supplemental food programs.

The program was held to initiate conversations and to spark ideas, sponsors Leslie Hossfeld and [Earl Sheridan](#) said.

“There's a lack of conversation about poverty,” said Sheridan, chairman of the UNCW Department of Public and International Affairs. “The issues have increased in the wake of the recession.”

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